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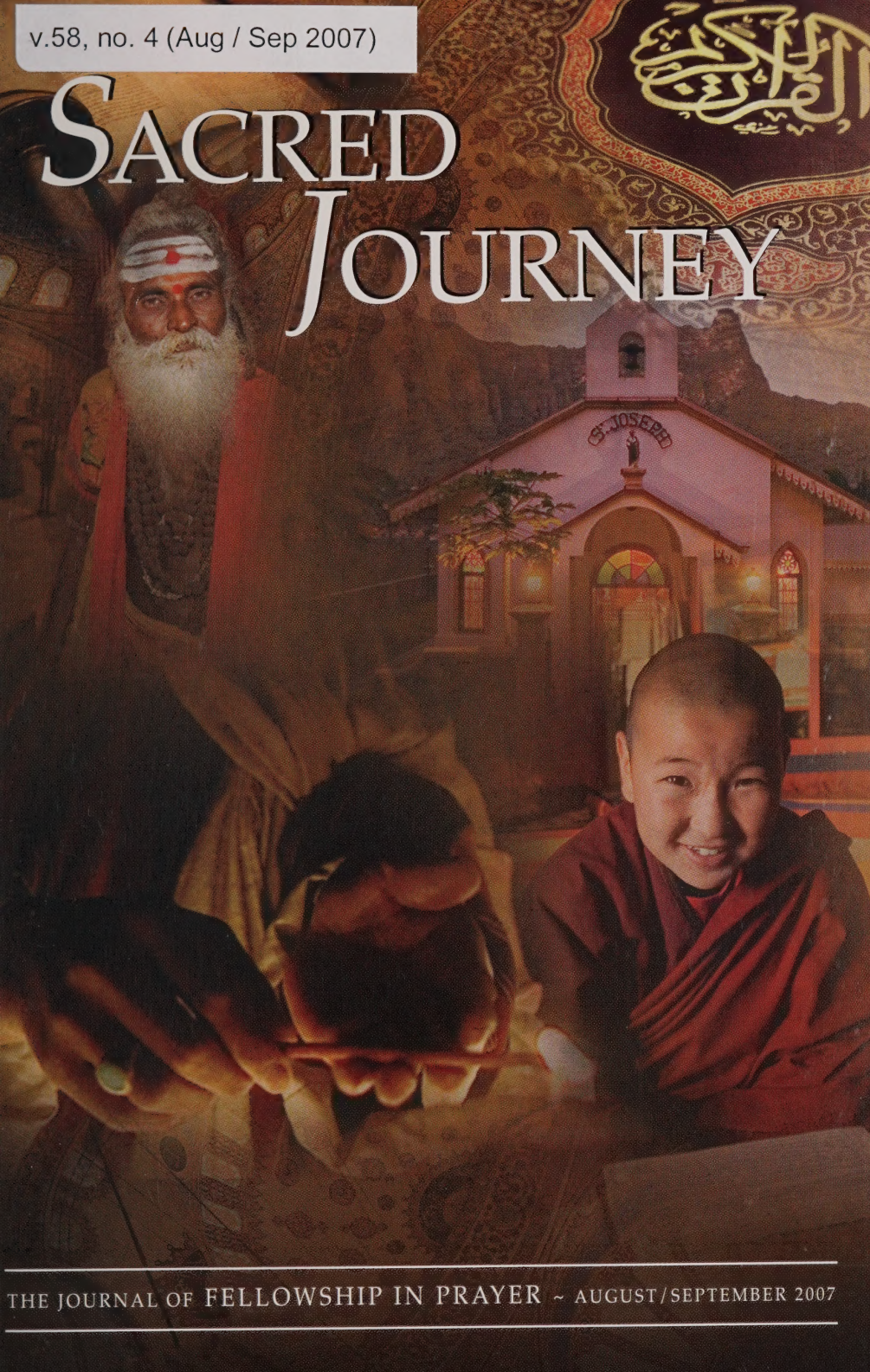

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CONTENTS

Vol. 58, No. 4, August/September 2007

A Message From Fellowship in Prayer
Reflecting on the Prayer of Fellowship
Albert J. Raboteau 2

Companions on the Journey
An Interview with James Shaheen 5

Prayers 14

An Interfaith Dialogue
What is Prayer
Annie Tucker, Ferhan Tunagur and Sam Sirianni 17

Poetry 32

One of Many Paths to God
Ratna Karmakar 36

Illuminations 40

A Reflection
The Thunderous Presence of Our Soft-spoken God
Richard M. Nahman 41

Books for the Journey 45

Endpiece 48

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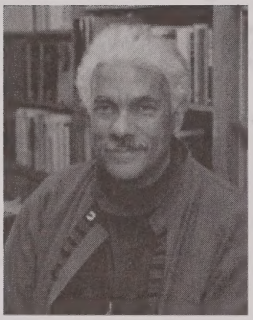
Reflecting on the Prayer of Fellowship

Albert J. Raboteau



Recently I participated in a conference on prayer, sponsored by the Center for the Study of Religion at Princeton University. As one of four panelists, I gave a brief presentation on Prayer of the Heart in the Eastern Orthodox Tradition. The Jesus Prayer, Prayer of the Heart, was introduced to the contemporary West through J.D. Salinger's novel *Franny and Zooey* and the anonymous Russian spiritual classic *The Way of a Pilgrim*. Its present form, "Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon me a sinner," can be traced to

A member of Fellowship in Prayer's Board, Albert Raboteau teaches at Princeton University in the Religion Department. His field of study is Religion in America, specializing in African-American Religious History. Recent courses he has offered include seminars on Thomas Merton; Religion and Immigration; Religious Radicals in 20th century America; and Re-enchanting the World: Religion and the Literature of Fantasy. He is currently on leave, working on a book about religion in contemporary fiction and film. He is one of the founders of an Orthodox mission in Plainsboro, NJ, which he serves as lay coordinator. His books include Slave Religion, A Fire in the Bones, Canaan Land, *and a spiritual memoir,* A Sorrowful Joy.

the sixth century and in variant forms to the frequent repetition of short prayers by fourth century desert ascetics, motivated by the injunction of St. Paul to "pray without ceasing."

In this prayer tradition, the continuous repetition of a simple prayer served not only to praise God and to express repentance, but also provided a way to move one's consciousness from the head to the heart, the symbolic center of the person and the site of God's presence within. The aim of Prayer of the Heart, as succinctly expressed by the nineteenth century Russian bishop, St. Theophan the Recluse, "is to stand before God with the mind in the heart and to go on standing before Him unceasingly day and night until the end of life." Prayer of the Heart is above all a prayer of presence, rooted in profound attention and continuous awareness of the presence of God, calling forth an attitude of wakeful silence, listening for God to speak. The repetition of the Jesus Prayer is meant to quiet the ever busy activity of discursive reason, the unceasing current of thoughts, memories, fantasies, and anxieties by focusing attention upon the prayer and through the prayer upon God's presence.

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The Jesus Prayer is usually recited alone. Indeed, fifteenth century critics of the tradition condemned it as a form of self-centered quietism but a consistent theme of the tradition emphasizes that prayer leads not to isolation, but rather to profound compassion and connection to all creation. The truly compassionate, according to the sixth century Syrian ascetic St. Isaac, spend whole nights in vigil, praying and weeping for all those who suffer—people, animals, and he adds, "even the demons." The prayer "enlarges"

the heart. Private prayer ineluctably becomes interpersonal. In other words, there are unseen webs of interrelationship that prayer establishes often beyond our comprehension and expectation.

It is these unseen but very real webs of relationship that constitute, I believe, the rationale for the Fellowship in Prayer. It has since its early days recognized the interpersonal dimension of prayer by creating circles of individuals and groups to pray together in spiritual fellowship at a designated hour each week. It was the genius of the founders of FiP to recognize the connection between individual prayer and prayer "in fellowship." The impulse which moved them to create FiP in 1949 was the threat to world peace posed by the development of the atomic bomb. They believed in the power of prayer to affect the world. Their hope and their vision seem no less vital today. After the tragic violence at Virginia Tech, we drew together in prayer in formal and informal services held around the nation. A similar outpouring of grief and compassion inspired prayer meetings in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, the Indian Ocean Tsunami, and the earthquakes in Pakistan. These tragedies and the ongoing crises we face—AIDS, genocide in Darfur, war in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, nuclear armament, and threats to the natural environment to name a few—impel us in our own time to respond by enlarging our hearts in the prayer of fellowship.

COMPANIONS ON THE JOURNEY

An Interview with James Shaheen

James Shaheen is a practicing Buddhist and editor and publisher of Tricycle: The Buddhist Review, *a not-for-profit quarterly publication based in New York City. A member of the American Society of Magazine Editors and onetime member of the Board of Directors of the Independent Press Association, Shaheen has worked in book and magazine publishing for the past twenty-five years. Before coming to* Tricycle, *he was on the editorial staff at* Forbes *magazine. He graduated from UC Berkeley with a degree in English literature.*

Shaheen, Buddhist writer Stephen Batchelor, and expert guide Shantum Seth will be leading a pilgrimage, "In the Footsteps of the Buddha," in January 2008. Details are available at www.tricycle.com

Fellowship in Prayer: We were recently privileged to hear your presentation on Buddhism in America, would you share with our readers how you came to embrace Buddhism?

James Shaheen: I had read a lot about Buddhism along the way, although for some time I didn't know much beyond what I read. I did, however, have a sitting practice. When I first came to *Tricycle*, I worked on the publishing side of the business but given my editorial background, I was often asked to edit articles. I became very interested in the Buddhist material I was reviewing. I finally decided I would go on a retreat at the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts, where I sat with Joseph Goldstein and Sharon Salzberg. There, in meditation practice, I found a way to free my mind—to center myself. I

discovered "letting go" was something that I really needed to do so I would not always be trying to control outcomes or make things go the way I wanted them to go. Buddhism didn't require of me any beliefs that I considered unreasonable or counter-intuitive, or ideas that demanded faith of which I had very little at that time. I learned instead to allow a process to unfold. I began to get back in touch with the trusting process I had once experienced as a child.

And what was that process?

In Buddhism, there are the Brahma Viharas or noble abodes.

When I was little and lost a toy in my house, I would pray to St. Anthony and I discovered it freed my mind sufficiently to look in a very open way without any preconceptions or assumptions about where my lost item might be. Inevitably, I would find it. Of course, as a child, whatever you lose is going to be around your house somewhere anyway, but my prayer put me in a state of mind where I was open and could very calmly go about searching. When I no longer believed there was a St. Anthony, I lost that "skillful means" for opening my mind—to relax and look. I rediscovered "skillful means" again in the Buddhist practice of meditation. I think it is Paul Ricoeur, the great French philosopher, who talks about "second naiveté," coming back to a place of "not knowing" and discovering a "fresh reality," a renewed faith. This was true for me.

Joseph Goldstein, cofounder of Insight Meditation Society and Buddhist teacher, helped me to better

understand "skillful means," what works to free the mind. In Catholicism, the "skillful means" that helped me to free my mind were found in the rituals of communion, confession, prayer, and of course, holiday ceremonies and celebration. Community was very important in this context, enabling a kind of collective release. Many Buddhists do not have the benefit of community because they do not necessarily live around a lot of other Buddhists. In Buddhism, it is the practice of daily meditation that provides the "skillful means" for freeing the mind.

How is prayer understood within the Buddhist tradition?

In Buddhism, there are four *Brahma Viharas* which represent the most beautiful and hopeful aspects of our human nature: *metta*—loving-kindness, *upekkha*—equanimity, *karuna*—compassion and *mudita*—sympathetic joy, joy in another person's success or well being. Filling the heart with these four qualities is practiced in the form of meditation and is similar to prayer. I would say it is aspirational. We are not praying for something, but the idea is to incline the mind in a certain way so we are imbued with the qualities of the noble abodes and our entire existence is centered on them. Have you heard of loving-kindness meditation? Let's say I practice this meditation. I am wishing others well. I am wishing that they be happy. I am wishing that they be safe. I am wishing that they be free. Even if I don't necessarily feel this way, I still meditate with these thoughts so my mind will incline in the direction of these favorable emotions. Prayer, if we can call it prayer in Buddhism and I do think it is the closest thing we have to prayer, is what we do to prepare the mind,

to free the mind or to imbue the mind with the qualities that will lead one toward liberation.

I am not a Christian scholar. I am not even a Buddhist scholar. I am an editor who deals with a lot of different teachers and has sat plenty of retreats in the Tibetan, Zen, Vipassana and Theravada traditions. I find in all cases the rituals and meditations are not ends in and of themselves. Ultimately in Buddhism, we let go of ritual; any kind of ritual that remains is there only to incline the mind in a certain way and prepare it to embody the very qualities that the Buddha embodied—compassion, loving kindness, joy and equanimity.

I don't really think that prayer is so different in Christianity. Christians are called upon to pray for their enemies just as Christ prayed for his persecutors and asked that they be forgiven. The average person may not be at this level of ability to forgive. We may not mean it when we pray for our enemies. It is interesting though what can happen if, in spite of ourselves, we pray for our adversaries. Our attitudes, approaches and feelings toward the persons we consider our enemies begin to change and evolve. In Buddhism, the enemy is in our minds. There is no devil out there. There is no enemy out there. It is all in the mind. Buddhists don't discuss a god or the existence of a god, or the non-existence of a god—we're not praying to a god. This is the big difference on the face of it between Buddhism and Christianity. Still, I believe that in the Christian tradition, the goal is to free the mind, to pray that "whatever happens I will have the ability to respond according to Christ's

teachings." Christians I know and admire pray like Mother Teresa.

She tells of a time when she was asked, "Do you pray?"

"Of course I pray!" Mother Teresa answered.

"To whom do you pray?"

She responded, "I pray to God."

The questioner continued, "What do you say when you pray to God?"

"I don't say anything at all, I just listen."

Then she was asked, "What does God say to you?"

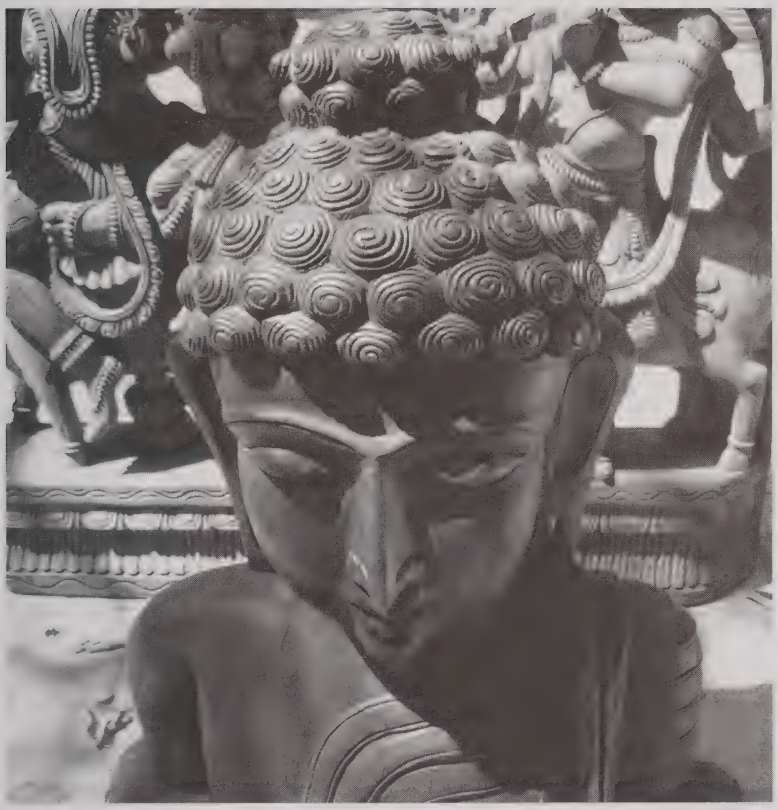
"Nothing at all," she said, "God just listens too."

Her idea of prayer seems to be more about a state of mind than asking for something. Mother Teresa is indisputably Christian yet she talks about prayer in a very different way from the way in which many Christians pray. In Buddhist meditation, one aspires to be a better, kinder person. This is where Christianity and Buddhism intersect. A lot of people might disagree with me, but I believe both Christianity and Buddhism intend to bring about a state of mind that is more open, more compassionate and more equaniminous.

You spoke briefly about *metta* or loving kindness meditation and its significance in Buddhist spiritual practice. Would you share what this means to you on your spiritual journey?

This practice has never been easy for me. The difficult part has been to think of those people who most agitate me, cause me the most grief or make me the most

unhappy or at least those I imagine are responsible for my unhappiness, and to say, "May they be happy." I have had teachers say to me, "Relax and do this to the extent that you can and then move on." "Just doing this," however, was not easy for me. Eventually, this changed. I think it was the repetition—practicing this meditation again and again, and again and again, until my mind became inclined to a more compassionate perspective. It is one thing to know intellectually that we should be kind to others and it is another to embody kindness. We can easily say we should love our neighbor and know this is right but how many of us can actually live it? It is especially difficult if our neighbor is noisy and disruptive to our peace of mind or quality of life. After awhile I began to realize that in wishing other people well...I was starting to melt a bit. I found that I did not view others so harshly. As the Dalai Lama proposes, I began to see them as persons who want to be happy and are struggling just as I am. Then I began to grasp the distinction that no matter what my neighbors do or who they are, they are not really the cause of my unhappiness. Intellectually, I always knew this to be true but I didn't live like I believed it. Loving-kindness meditation has helped me to realize I don't have to hold angry feelings toward my neighbor because in fact, that person isn't even the cause of my disturbance. I began to internalize the realization that my upset, the source of my unhappiness, was coming from my mind. Whatever transgressions, real or imagined, someone else has committed, they are done. It is my choice what to do next. In any and all conditions, I am responsible for my own peace of mind. In Buddhism we talk about the



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importance of compassion and loving-kindness. It is my choice to be compassionate towards others, even as it is also important that I make choices that don't allow me to be hurt in the same way by the same person.

Loving-kindness helps me let go of my grudges, my judgments, my opinions of others. Let me explain this point with a popular story of two Zen monks. As you may know, they are celibate and not allowed to touch women.

> Two monks are walking along one day when they reach a stream. A woman is standing on

the banks, unable to cross. One of the monks picks up the woman and carries her across. The other monk is appalled at his fellow monk's behavior. For several miles they walk along in silence until the agitated monk blurts out, "You know, I can't believe you picked that woman up and carried her." The other monk softly responds, "I put her down on the other side of the stream while you're still carrying her."

Loving-kindness meditation, difficult as it has been, has helped me to embrace the meaning of this story and make the shift from thinking other people are the source of my unhappiness to understanding that the source of my unhappiness is in my mind. I am far from being a totally realized human being. Nonetheless, fully practicing meditation has immeasurably improved my life and changed the way I treat others.

Suppose your mother or father is sick, do you send them healing thoughts through meditation?

In Asia it is not uncommon for a Buddhist to believe that loving-kindness meditation has a positive effect on the object of that meditation. In fact, many people believe this. There are others who believe this meditation really reorients the mind or redirects the mind of the person who is the supplicant, the person who is praying. For me, this meditation improves my state of mind and makes me a kinder person. I don't know how it affects others, except my behavior toward them changes, and that may affect them in a positive way. When somebody I love very much is sick I do whatever I can to help them heal, whether it means

visiting them in the hospital or providing them with other comforts. I also understand that beyond a certain point, there is nothing more I can do. Accepting this allows a kind of equanimity, one of the *Bramha Vaharas.* With equanimity I know what I can do and what I can't, where I can be effective and where I can't. When someone I love is near the end of life, it doesn't mean that I don't feel grief but I do not pray that the person will not die. I say, "May they have peace and may they face whatever they need to face in the way they need to face it and may I be able to do the same."

It sounds like you have an intention in your *metta*, or loving-kindness meditation?

Yes, there is an intention. You first wish yourself well, and then you wish a friend or a benefactor well, and then you wish a person well about whom you are neutral, like somebody at the post office for whom you have no feelings one way or another. Interestingly enough, if you practice a *metta* meditation for the postal worker for whom you have no feelings, you find when you see that person, you feel something, a sort of joyful recognition, like you want to say "Hi, how are you?" as if you now know one another. You have actually brought yourself to a point of including this person in your circle. Even more powerful is when you begin to practice this meditation toward your enemies or any difficult person, as we describe these individuals in contemporary language.

The intention of my loving-kindness meditation in this instance is for me to wish these persons well, to have good feelings toward them, to be of assistance to them, to communicate love and compassion, joy and equanimity. Ultimately, this will help me on the path to liberation.

Castaway

My soul is cast off
from Your Presence.

I am adrift,
tossed by winds of change,
buffeted by storms of the unknown.

Let me feel the touch
of Your mysterious grace and mercy
when tumults and fear heap upon my heart.

Pervade the depths of my being
with Your impeccable peace.

~ Sandra H. Bounds

Sandra H. Bounds is an active member of the Mississippi Poetry Society where she held the honor of being named the 2005 Poet of the Year. She earned a Master of Arts degree in English from Mississippi State University. Sandra has served as an instructor at the East Mississippi Community College as well as several private and public high schools in her hometown of Macon, MS.

Susi Richardson makes her home in Concord, NH. She takes to heart the advice of the Sufi sage Rumi: "Let the beauty you love be the beauty you do." These days she gives her soul creative expression by loving, praying, practicing yoga, paying attention, making art, and being grateful.

Dear Spirit of the Morning

Bless you!

As the sun gently rises
to its home in the sky,
I pray:

May my heart be open
to the wonder of the day.

May I be mindful
as I move through the hours.

May I bow to the Divine
in each being I meet.

May gratitude uplift me,
patience guide me.

May I feel the embrace
of the Light that is Love

and radiate from the inside
out upon the world.

Humbly
I ask this.

Humbly
I pray.

~ Susi Richardson

Prayer

A prayer
is a voice
rising,
an arrow
in the mind
of God.

A prayer
becomes
a mountain
or a flame,
a healing,
or a gift.

~ *Susan Landon*

I recognize you, the Buddha, in myself, in the seeds of awakening and love in me that make it possible for me to practice understanding and compassion.

~ *Thich Nhat Hanh*

Susan Landon's spiritual journey began with early participation in a Protestant church. She subsequently explored world religions through travel, study and personal practice. Her devotional poetry frequently appears in religious publications including the United Methodist Church's Alive Now *and* The Quaker Friends Journal

An Interfaith Dialogue on Prayer

Fellowship in Prayer recently co-hosted an Interfaith Dialogue Luncheon with the Interfaith Dialog Center of New Jersey and its other partners. On the panel were three representatives, one from each of the Abrahamic traditions addressing the question, "What Is Prayer?" Following are excerpts from their presentations.

WHAT IS PRAYER...IN JUDAISM

Rabbi Annie Tucker: I'd like to begin my remarks today with a short story which has always served for me as a powerful metaphor about Jewish prayer. Rabbi Harold Kushner tells the tale of a little boy who states to his father that he is going across the street to help a friend who has just broken his new bicycle. Surprised, the boy's father gives his son a hard time, indicating that the child knows nothing about fixing bikes and surely will not be of much help to his friend. "It is true that I don't know how to fix bicycles," the

Annie Tucker currently serves as Assistant Rabbi of The Jewish Center, Princeton, NJ. She earned her Bachelor's Degree from The University of Pennsylvania where she majored in Psychology and Jewish Studies. She obtained her Master's Degree in Jewish Education at the Jewish Theological Seminary and was ordained.

young boy admits, "but that is not why I want to go. I want to cross the street to help my friend cry."

For me, Kushner's story captures the essence of what Jewish prayer is all about. For while there is a concern with efficacy that pervades our prayer lives at certain moments—a desire for our prayers to change the world or at least our particular circumstances—I believe far more often what brings people together in worship is a sense of looking for a partner in tears, a desire to join together in community and reach outside of ourselves to find comfort or share joy.

In my opinion, there are three aspects of Jewish prayer that define our liturgical tradition and make it distinctive and I'd like to speak briefly about each of these in turn. The first significant component of Jewish worship is its balancing of *keva* (fixed, liturgical prayer) and *kavannah* (spontaneous emanations of the heart). As many of us well know, there are many reasons to recommend both established, canonical prayer and also unstructured conversation with the Divine. *Kavannah* helps enable our prayers to be deeply personal and relevant, organic communications offered whenever the mood strikes us. This kind of worship speaks to our most private yearnings and brings us into a unique and individual relationship with God. Indeed, tradition places much emphasis on *kavannah* and the biblical Hannah is seen as one of the great paragons of Jewish prayer, a woman deep in the throes of infertility who cries out to God with such fervor and passion that she actually appears to be drunk. This kind of personal communion with God—whether in the synagogue or in the privacy of one's home—is seen as vital. The Jewish prayer service

contains moments when silent personal prayer is specifically encouraged in addition to reading the words of the *siddur* (prayer book).

At the same time, Jewish tradition also values *keva* (fixed, liturgical prayer). *Keva* connects us across time and space—ensuring that Jews praying in Israel and Europe are reciting a service virtually identical to that of Jews here in America and the prayers we say today are the same ones our great-grandparents chanted hundreds of years ago and which our grandchildren will recite once we are gone. *Keva* indicates that we join together not only as individuals but also as a community and that there are times when we sublimate our personal concerns to those of the world around us. *Keva* also indicates that we are not ultimate sources of power and authority but rather are part of a tradition larger than ourselves which sometimes makes demands upon us. Much of Jewish worship emphasizes *keva* as we recite fixed words of our prayer book three times a day. Our tradition affirms both reading texts that have a deep tradition and broad community behind them and finding space for individual relationship with the Divine. The goal is to find a meaningful balance of *keva* and *kavannah* in our own personal prayer lives!

The second aspect of Jewish worship which I find significant is the issue of community. Many of our tradition's most central prayers—including part of the *Amidah* (the Standing Prayer) and the *Mourner's Kaddish* (recited when someone has passed away)—can only be said in a *minyan,* a quorum of ten individuals. Recently I was asked by a member of my congregation why Judaism imposes the difficult requirement of *minyan,* rather than allowing for all prayers to be recited

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individually. Another congregant answered by saying that our tradition makes him feel obligated to come to services because he wants to make sure that there is *minyan* for those who need it. This congregant's response speaks to the communal nature of Jewish prayer—building in a sense of responsibility one for another and ensuring that we are never alone during our time of mourning. Prayer involves stepping outside of ourselves, joining together with others and ultimately creating a true community of worship.

Finally, a last defining aspect of Jewish prayer is its transformative nature. Our tradition's liturgy developed largely as a replacement for the sacrificial system which came to an end in the year 70 of the Common Era, after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. Until that point, animal sacrifice had

served as the major mode of Jewish worship; with its decline, new modalities were developed out of necessity. Indeed, the Hebrew word for sacrifice, *korban*, is derived from the same root as the Hebrew word meaning to draw close. An important element of Jewish worship is to develop a relationship with and a closeness to God.

While the notion of drawing close was an important element of the sacrificial system and remains a key component of contemporary Jewish worship, I would argue that prayer achieves its true meaning only when it leverages our relationship with God to bring us into relationship with the world around us. Jewish prayer captures this in the tripartite theme that characterizes much of our liturgy—a triad of creation, revelation and redemption. Many of our prayer services along with a number of the prayers themselves speak about God who created the world, gave us Torah, and will ultimately redeem us at the end of time, bringing humanity into a perfected state of being and healing the world's many problems. In this endeavor, Judaism believes that humans are partners with God.

When we pray we are not only connecting to God, we are puting ourselves in touch with the values of healing, peace and equality that we hold most dear, articulating the values and ideals that we hope to bring into our lives. This reminds us that prayer with our bodies—taking concrete action to repair the world—is as necessary as prayer with our mouths.

The great Jewish theologian and civil rights crusader, Dr. Abraham Joshua Heschel, spoke about the concept of "praying with your feet." He said that when we involve ourselves in political activism, when

we vote and speak out and march for causes that are important to us, it is a form of worship. To me it seems that engaging in interfaith dialogue about prayer—coming together to pray as one community—is "praying with our feet" on two levels. It is, of course, literal prayer—speaking words of hope and faith before God—but it is also symbolic prayer—a way of stepping towards the understanding and tolerance, fellowship and peace that we most fervently wish for. This kind of prayer takes us beyond ourselves, beyond our relationship with our faith community, even beyond our relationship with God, to begin creating the kind of world in which we most want to live.

In conclusion, I would like to share another story. It is about a little girl who went into the woods by her house every day, disappearing for hours on end. The girl's mother finally said to her daughter, "My child, what is it that you do everyday when you go into the woods?" The little girl replied, "I go into the woods to talk to God." The girl's mother was surprised and she responded warmly, "My daughter, it is wonderful that you find time each day to talk to God for talking to God is an important thing. But don't you know that you needn't go into the woods to find God? God is the same everywhere." At this point, the little girl looked at her mother. "God may be the same everywhere," she said, "but I most certainly am not."

May we all find those places where we are not the same and may we come together eagerly and often to create a world of peace. Amen.

...IN ISLAM

Ferhan Tunagur: In the Islamic tradition, prayer defines our lives. There is a verse in the Qur'an that reads, *"I only created humans for them to worship Me (to serve Me)."* (Qur'an, 51; 56) As Muslims we understand what prayer is through the Qur'an and the sayings and actions of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). Anything we talk about related to Islam is about prayer and worship. God decides our lives for us in order to make the whole of life a prayer. Through prayer, God binds together all our struggles and problems, hopes and dreams. If you look at the daily life of our Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), you see the verse *"I only created humans for them to serve Me"* lived on a 24/7 basis. His actions teach us that when we get up and when we go to sleep there is a prayer; when we enter the bathroom and leave the bathroom, there is a prayer; when we start eating and stop eating, when we talk to people, when we drive in our cars—there are prayers and all these different prayers transform our worldly lives into a prayer.

Ferhan Tunagur is a professor and student at Rutgers University. He teaches the Introduction to Communications classes as well as Turkish Language classes within the Middle Eastern Studies Department. As a graduate student in Communications, he studies the dynamics and nature of face to face interaction in our everyday lives.

In the Qur'an God says, "*Say (O Muhammad), My Lord would not care for you were it not for your prayer.*" (Qur'an, 25; 77) This is a very drastic statement, because in another verse, God says "*Do you not see that God has made all that is in the heavens and all that is on the earths of service to you.*" (Qur'an, 31; 20) So, although God places human beings at the very center of all creation—without prayer, they have no importance. Later in the Qur'an, God says, "*Pray to Me, I will answer you.*" (Qur'an, 40; 60) Now there are some problems in our understanding of this statement because there are many times when we pray but whatever we have prayed for is not given to us. Companions of the Prophet (pbuh) asked this same question of him and the Prophet's (pbuh) response was that prayer is always answered, but prayer is not always accepted as it is. The essence of understanding this response is in recognizing that as a human being, you may be asking for something that is not what should be given to you. For instance, suppose you go to a doctor to be treated for an illness but you don't know what's making you sick and you ask the doctor to give you medication but the doctor says, "Well, you actually need surgery here." Would you say, "Look at this doctor, he is not a worthy doctor because he didn't give me what I wanted—but he did perform surgery to keep me alive." You cannot truthfully say that the doctor is not worthy; the doctor is actually very good. The issue is that you didn't know what to ask for, just as sometimes we don't know what to pray for. This highlights the distinction between God accepting our prayer and answering our prayer.

What things happen that require prayer? We become sick. There are wars. There are problems

establishing peace. If I ask for something that I want without any assurance of getting it, is it worth it? What should I do? The answer to this question is that all the things that happen around us and call for prayer are not only the reasons for prayer; they point to the timing for prayer. A time of conflict and war is a time of prayer for peace. If the peace doesn't come to us, then the time for that peace is not yet right. We need to keep praying. If we don't have rain, for instance, and we pray for rain, the reason for the prayer is not just to get the rain but to answer God's call to pray for rain. Whether God gives the rain or not is His decision. It is our responsibility to answer God's call to pray for rain during this time.

Prayer is a form of worship and all worship is done only for the sake of God. If God wants to give us something in return, then it is because He knows what we need and chooses to give it to us. Some things we ask for are only given in the hereafter, not in the here and now. For Muslims, prayer is not something we do only when we have a problem, as in "Let me ask God and then he will solve this problem for me." In its essence, prayer in the Islamic tradition is the understanding of our powerlessness and weakness before God who is all powerful, all the time. In our tradition we would say, the one who knows himself/herself knows God. An important part of the process of prayer is understanding where we stand before God. We come before God and say, "Here is my witness, here is my powerlessness, here is my problem" and God steps in. Sincere prayers require us not only to ask God for help but to obey Him. With prayers of repentance or gratitude for example—

if I say these prayers but don't practice repentance or gratitude, then my prayer is insincere. On the other hand, if I repent and if I am grateful then my prayers are sincere and accepted.

Within Islamic prayer tradition there is not only me and God, there is also a connection with other Muslims. Then, since Muslims, Christians, and Jews are all people of the Book, we are all praying, believing in one God and asking for His forgiveness. Our circle of prayer then becomes even larger when we look around and see all of nature praying—the diverse plants and animals. Their prayer is of a

Richard M. Nahman\Iris Ann Ledden

Let all creation bow down before our God.

different sort than ours because with our free will we can choose not to pray, but plants and animals do not have this choice. By nature of their existence, they are constantly praying.

When I pray a single, simple prayer, I am not the only one who is praying. I am among those who are constantly praying, including plants and animals, the angels, other human beings, Muslims, Christians, Jews and all people of faith. This puts us all together in the same boat and might actually be a solution to all our conflicts in this world—to recognize that we are, by our very nature, doing the same thing. Verbally and nonverbally, we get into conflict but if we acknowledge that all other creatures are praying to God the same as we are, we rid ourselves of fear and aggression. We pray then for change in ourselves, to understand and relate to one another better. We need to realize however, that we are not asking to be totally changed in order to become like one another. God could have created us all the same, as one. God chose not to do this, even though it was in His power to do so. In the Qur'an God says *"O humankind, we created you from a male and a female, and we made you nations and tribes for you to get to know each other."* (Qur'an, 49;13) God wants us to learn how to live together with our differences. Maybe, prayer can lead the way!

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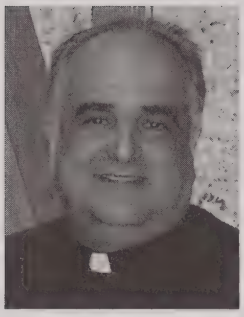
...IN CHRISTIANITY



Reverend Sam Sirianni: When I, as a Roman Catholic priest, am asked the question "What is prayer?" I first think of the sacred liturgy, the celebration of the Mass. It is our most important prayer—the worship of God the Father, in the name of Jesus Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit. However, within the Mass there are various prayer styles that express not only how Roman Catholics pray but how people from other Christian traditions pray as well. The Mass is a liturgical structure, innately communal in nature, yet also offering private moments when we are asked to open ourselves to God within our hearts. There are prayers of penitence, when we remember our sins; intercessory prayers when we bring before God the needs of the world; and prayers of thanksgiving to God for the gift of Jesus, the gift of each other and the gift of faith. Christian prayer also takes the form of prayer found in the Bible, the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. Many Protestant traditions have

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long held firm to the notion that the Bible is a book of prayer. Reading the Bible and sitting with the Word of God allows the Word to transform us and change our lives. The Divine Office, the ancient prayer of the Church based on the psalms, was once reserved for Catholic clergy, monks and nuns. Today, lay people are encouraged to pray this biblical prayer. In the Quaker tradition, people gather and pray in communal silence until the Spirit moves them to speak. Silent contemplation has deep roots in the Christian faith—and in the monastic prayer of various religious communities and in centering prayer in which a particular sacred word or phrase is used to quiet the mind and enable us to be still in the presence of the Holy.

At its core, prayer is communication with God. I remember as a child being told that prayer is talking to God. I learned set prayers, such as the Lord's Prayer and the Hail Mary and I said them often. However, I had a moment in high school when I went beyond that type of prayer to more spontaneous prayer, expressing what was in my own heart at that moment. My father had the first of six heart attacks. I remember this was a very tense time in our house as my father dealt with his health and mortality and the rest of the family had to deal with him. Being the oldest in this tiny household, a lot of my father's criticism was heaped in my direction. I remember walking out of the house one day feeling very angry. I went to our little parish church where I spent time just talking to God. Gradually my frustration and fear dissipated, allowing me to return home and better serve my family, especially my father. When the heart prays, it is truly

spontaneous. It is highly personal, coming directly out of our desires, hopes and fears. Stylized spoken prayers remain profoundly meaningful, however, as they help us to pray when the heart is unable to find words because our pain, struggle and frustration are so intense.

Music is also a powerful expression of Christian prayer. It is inspiring when voices are raised in songs of praise, not only those of our choirs, but the voices of all the men and women in our congregations. Think of the ancient chants, the well-known anthems from the Protestant traditions and the rousing songs of praise in contemporary Christian music that can bring down the house. Let's not forget Christian rock that allows some of us to experience God while others experience Excedrin Headache #74.

Using our bodies to kneel, sit and stand before the presence of God is a physical expression of prayer. I personally try not to pray lying down because even though the good sisters taught me, "the angels can finish your prayer before you fall asleep," I'm not so sure it's a good idea to fall asleep on God! Prayer that engages body and soul is conveyed in the movement of dance to drums or voices of praise, often found in ritual celebrations in Africa and among many African-American communities here in the States. Liturgical dance is not intended to be something observed by the assembly, rather it is an expression of communal celebration. In the early American Shaker movement, the spirit of God was experienced as so overwhelming the faithful couldn't sit still. Pentecostal and charismatic

worship to this day engage participants in prayer that is wholly expressive and active.

Christian prayer has taken many forms throughout the ages, from highly vocal liturgical rituals and worship to silent contemplation in the Divine Presence. However, Christian prayer, like all prayer, is intended to become part of everyday life. I would like to close by sharing a story that illustrates how the "ordinary" can be made prayerful. Growing up in an Italian-American family who happened to own an Italian restaurant, we all waited on tables and took care of our patrons. My father, who worked in the kitchen, used to bake his own bread. As a child, I remember him saying that as he baked each loaf of bread, he offered it up as a gift to God and prayed for the people who would eat that bread—that it would nourish them. Those of you who bake bread know you have to vent it, and my father would vent his bread by making the sign of the cross on the loaf. He said this was his daily prayer.

All our ways of prayer invite us to enter into a holy union with God, a communion that is rooted in a dialogue with the Divine, a dialogue that first began with God's revelation to Abraham, our father in faith. That dialogue continues to this day. As we learn to recognize that we are all created in the image of God and we begin to see in one another a reflection of the Divine Image, it will become more and more difficult to cast a stone at one another or to attack each other. It may take a while for us to see clearly because the walls we have built to separate us are many and high, they are thick and old, but little by little, we can take them down as we learn from each other, share, listen and pray together.

Confession

Arthur LeClair

The worst diminishing thing
I do to myself
is to make God too small.

My original sin
is to put God in a box
and have it done with.

I want to make life tidy,
like *I'm entitled*
to smooth sailing.

But God, thank God
knows my M.O.

God says:
"Why worry about shipwrecks if I am the ocean?"

Arthur LeClair is currently at work on Christ as Hero, *using the study of Joseph Campbell's* The Hero With a Thousand Faces. *He lives with his wife, Joanne, in Centennial, CO. They have two sons, Jeff and David. The last line of the poem is a quote from Thomas Merton.*

Meditation Blues

Kenneth J. Zahorski

Despite images soothing
and mantras potent,
thoughts fly everywhere
in my aviary mind, diving
and swooping like swallows,
chirping sharp as sparrows,
chattering nonstop magpie-like,
shrieking like jays, and some,
like mourning doves,
roosting in evergreen silence,
exploding forth
when least expected.

I strain to clear the air,
to still the static,
but finally surrender
to shriek and swoop,
remembering good St. Francis,
his slender arms
serving as branches
for the very creatures
I wish to silence.

Kenneth J. Zahorski lives in Green Bay, Wisconsin. He is Professor Emeritus of English at St. Norbert College and the author of twelve books. A member of The Wisconsin Fellowship of Poets and The Rockford Writers' Guild, his poems have appeared in numerous literary magazines and journals.

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Vaster

Sever
Not
Your
Longing
For the light
Beyond the horizon
Is vaster than the kiss
Of the ocean and
The sand

silent lotus

Night Sea Journey

Nancy Compton Williams

When you pass through the waters I will be with you…
they shall not overwhelm you. ~ *Isaiah 43:2*

Let yourself down
into waters' embrace.
You no longer need
your reflection.
Spirit will flow
into Spirit.
You will be born again.

The poetry of silent lotus is archived as "Listening to Love" and his visual art as "Icons of Silence." There is a presence offered that attracts people to look for his spiritual guidance in many countries. You are welcome to visit with him at www.silentlotus.net or email: insight@silentlotus.net

Nancy Compton Williams is a poet and teacher of poetry and serves on the editorial board for Poem.

One of Many Paths to God

Ratna Karmakar

"If one would ask me under what sky the human mind has most fully developed its special gifts, has scrutinized most profoundly the greatest problems of life, and has at least, for some, provided solutions which deserve to be admired, even by those who have studied Plato and Kant, I would indicate India."

from The Essentials of Hinduism *by Bhaskarananda*

Fellowship in Prayer: As we've been exploring prayer in various faith traditions this issue, can you tell us what prayer is in the Hindu tradition?

Ratna Karmakar: I would like to emphasize that I am really not an expert on Hinduism nor am I a very ritualistic person, but I will share with you what I know and how I think about prayer from my own experience. Hinduism is thousands of years old and is really a free form of practice. In India, it has long been held that there are multiple spiritual paths to God. No one has to do exactly the same thing. A Hindu is not required to go to temple on a regular basis, although they go to the temple to celebrate special occasions like births and deaths and to ask the priests to perform particular rituals. A Hindu is not required to read any particular sacred text, although the Vedas are the most ancient of religious texts and offer wisdom for faith and spiritual practice. A Hindu is not required to pray in any certain way although prayer is an important part of

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everyday life. To be a good Hindu, one has only to be sincere and committed to searching for the truth and God.

Prayer in Hinduism is called *puja.* This is a Hindu word that combines two words, *purna* and *jagaran.* The meaning of *purna jagaran* is full awakening. The mind is considered a temple of God. So the whole purpose of *puja* is to reach God and realize God in your mind and heart. In the Hindu religion, Brahman is the source of all existence and the different gods are all manifestations or expressions of Brahman. People pray to God in these many different forms. Some Hindus image God as their most beloved person, such as their mother. Families often choose to worship gods or goddesses to whom they are especially devoted.

If Hindus do not go to temple regularly, how and where does prayer or worship occur?

Almost every Hindu family I know has a shrine inside their home. The wealthy may set aside a whole room. The poor may have only a very simple shrine next to their beds. Traditionally, in the morning when we wake up, we do p*uja.* We chant hymns, the mantras from *Bhagavad-Gita,* or the *Upanishads,* or we sing what we call *bhajana* (music of the gospel). We chant the names of whichever gods or goddesses we most love—Rama, Krishna, Sarasvati, or Durga, or whomever. It is according to each one's own belief and choice. We have prayer beads, similar to a Catholic rosary. The strand is made up of 108 beads, and we may chant the names of the gods, touching one bead at a time and completing the circle.

Many religious rituals are done by women in India because so much of Hindu practice takes place within

the home. The first thing the mother of the family does in the morning is to bathe the deities and change their clothing. The god or goddess is then offered flowers and food. These actions treat the god as a living presence. In Hinduism we offer food in our prayers. This is called *prasâda*. The word is translated literally as "gracious gift." It describes the material substance of food, first offered to a deity, and transformed to "spiritual mercy" by our devotion and God's grace. Food is then distributed in the god's name and shared by everyone. It is especially intended to be shared with the poor. We may offer the god a piece of fruit, or a whole meal, or some sweet, depending on what we can afford, and we then partake of this food with the other people in the house. This means even the person who works in your household should be sitting next to you at table.

One of the things I remember most vividly about Hindu prayer was that in the evening, from every Hindu household, a conch was blown. It was a way of telling everyone it was time to return home. This practice predates clocks and various other electronic devices. Everyone knew, regardless of where they were, that when they heard the conch, it was time to drop everything and go home. Upon arriving home, family members washed their hands and feet, bowed down to their gods or goddesses, and then started their studies or evening chores. I always liked that very much. Prayer started our day and brought us all back home again.

There are four paths of worship in Hinduism: *Bhakti Yoga*—the path of devotion, *Jnana Yoga*—the path of rational inquiry, *Raja Yoga*—the path of

mental concentration, and *Karma Yoga*—the path of right action. It depends on a person's nature and spiritual inclination how yoga is done. Devotion, knowledge and selfless service are all intended to help us live the cycle of birth, death and rebirth until ultimate peace and surrender to God is achieved.

There is a saying that Hindus have thirteen festivals in twelve months—it is a saying but it conveys the notion that we have millions of festivals. Hindu spiritual practice is more like organized religion today, especially in Western culture but that is a topic for another time. Do you have any other questions?

How does Hindu prayer connect you to the larger world community?

There have been many Western philosophers and theologians who have been truly impressed by the Hindu religion. Everyone knows that Mahatma Gandhi proposed nonviolence as the way to win people's hearts. A well known British historian, Arnold Joseph Toynbee said, "At this supremely dangerous moment in human history, the only way of salvation is the Indian way." I believe this to be true because India does not have a history of having invaded or initiated an attack on another country. Are we meek? I don't know, but whatever we are, people of many different religious beliefs have come to capture India over the centuries and have themselves been assimilated. This has not occurred without difficulty and strife but the Indian people with their predisposition to accept many paths to God have been able to embrace all people in an exchange of culture and religious practices.

ILLUMINATIONS

To pray is to take notice of the wonder, to regain a sense of the mystery that animates all beings.

~ Abraham Joshua Heschel

The fruit of silence is prayer. The fruit of prayer is faith. The fruit of faith is love and the fruit of love is silence.

~ Mother Teresa

Accustom yourself gradually to carry prayer into all your daily occupation—speak, act, work in peace, as if you were in prayer.

~ Francois Fenelon

At the back of our brains, so to speak, there is a forgotten blaze or burst of astonishment at our own existence. The object of the artistic and spiritual life is to dig for this sunrise of wonder.

~ G.K. Chesterton

I listen to the prayer of every supplicant when he calls on Me.

~ The Koran

I am in all hearts. I give and take away knowledge and memory: I am all that the Vedas tell, I am the teacher, the knower of Vedanta.

~ Lord Krishna, Bhagavad-Gita

The Thunderous Presence of Our Soft-spoken God

Richard M. Nahman

Our soft-spoken God is in constant dialogue with those created in the Divine image. Unfortunately I am often too busy about other things to attend to the presence of this loving whisper. I usually find myself "hearing" God's subdued message of presence and care only in retrospect. As in the legend of the Lone Ranger, I ask myself at the end of each day, "Who was that masked man?"

But this reflection is not about the soft-spoken theophanies that permeate our lives. It is about an episode so poignant, so Tabor-like, the magnificence of Divine presence simply overwhelmed me.

Hudson was a nineteen-year-old afflicted with bone cancer. After a lengthy and painful routine of therapies his situation was diagnosed as terminal. When his prognosis indicated he had about six weeks left to live, Hudson was invited to join the Palliative (Hospice) unit of the Canadian hospital where I was a staff team member.

Richard M. Nahman is an Augustinian priest. He lives in Bronx, NY where under the auspices of Food for the Poor he advocates for the needy in the Caribbean basin. He also serves on the New York City Board of Corrections and on an NGO Committee to the UN.

Hudson was a very angry person—angry at his disease, angry at the rotten cards he had been dealt, angry at his mother who never visited, at his father who rarely visited—angry at the world. And this anger was heaped upon each and every person who attended him; doctor, nurse, aide, technician, chaplain, volunteer. Only his sister seemed to be somewhat immune to his anger. Kara was a college student. Each day after classes she would come and simply be present—sometimes quietly conversing but more often than not just being there, sitting cross-legged in the corner reading or doing homework. Even now, over ten years later, her quiet ministry inspires me and reminds me of God's unobtrusive presence in my life.

The six weeks came and went and Hudson lingered. The never-ending barrage of anger began to weary the staff—a community of self-giving, sensitive, caring people the likes of which I have never elsewhere experienced—one of the richest blessings in my life.

As the third month drew to a close the staff realized we had to minister to ourselves if we were to continue ministering to Hudson. So we decided that on a given Wednesday the early shift would stay a half-hour longer and the later shift would come in a half-hour earlier and we would use that time to be together, present to God and one another, with Hudson as the focus.

Ten or twelve of us met in the staff room. Our hour was to be divided into two. We spent the first half-hour in prayer and quiet. We affirmed each other by responding to the question: "How have you been a gift to Hudson?" Each of us put into words the attitude, behavior, presence or skill we

witnessed another staff person exhibiting while ministering to Hudson. It was a powerful half-hour of being acknowledged by professional peers. Emotions ran high!

We were just concluding this first part when Marie, the head of volunteers who managed the unit while we were meeting, knocked and entered. As words haltingly came from her amid tears, she announced that Hudson had rung his buzzer and when she responded, he had angrily demanded to know where everyone was. She told him that we were in the staff room praying for him. She said his eyes widened and for the first time in three months a smile came to his lips. He then laid back his head and died. We joined Marie in tearful amazement.

I have heard the thunderous voice of God.

The second part of our time together was to have been mutually sharing how Hudson had been a gift to us, enriching our lives, and what depths within ourselves our ministry to Hudson had enabled us to plumb. Instead, we quietly filed into Hudson's room and stood around his bed in a silence so profound that one could not but hear the voice of God. The chaplain had prayer cards depicting a hand holding a child in its palm...featuring the biblical text reminding us that we are loved with an everlasting love, and are held in the palm of God's hand (Isaiah 49:15-16). He placed these on Hudson's breast and invited us to come forward and silently or aloud thank Hudson for being a gift. We each took a card to remind

ourselves that we had been the divine hand holding Hudson.

Like Peter on Tabor, I am still today filled with the wonder of it all. I have not yet been able to relate this story without a lump in my throat or tear in my eye. Instead of building a tent, I write this reflection. I have heard the thunderous voice of God softly speaking through the silenced lips of an unbelieving, angry teenager.

BOOKS FOR THE JOURNEY

"The love of learning, the sequestered nooks, and all the sweet serenity of books."

~ Henry W. Longfellow

THE FAITH CLUB: A Muslim, A Christian, A Jew—Three Women Search for Understanding
by Ranya Idliby, Suzanne Oliver, Priscilla Warner
Free Press, 2006
Reviewed by Rebecca Laird

Sometimes a good idea becomes the seed for an even greater idea. That's what happened when the three authors of *The Faith Club* came together in the months after 9-11, ostensibly to write a children's book to "highlight the connection within Judaism, Christianity, and Islam." (p.5) The women soon found they couldn't write the children's book because there was no connection between them. They found they could be polite with each other but they weren't able to be frank or at ease. Their beliefs, doubts and cultural assumptions were not shared ones. They would have to open up their lives and beliefs to the scrutiny of relationship and honest conversation and see what they found before collaboration would be possible.

Each of the women soon discovered she had to delve more deeply into her own religious tradition to explain it to the others who had very real questions. Suzanne had to take a new look at the central story of Christianity when Priscilla, the Jew, physically recoiled

when she recounted the story of Jesus' crucifixion. Priscilla felt the Jews were blamed for his death and she could feel the centuries of Jewish persecution in her bones as the story was retold. Ranya, the Muslim, pushed back hard against Priscilla over the creation of the state of Israel. Soon it would be Suzanne's turn to question if one could really find God apart from Jesus when forced to account for the spiritual vitality in her new friends. As they talked the women began to realize that the real project they were pursing was not a children's book, but a friendship strong enough to allow for honest disclosure about what really matters in life.

The three women met often over tea and chocolate. The book unfolds through journal entries of these meetings that describe their different perspectives. Snippets of dialogue are also interspersed to keep the conversational tone of the book steady. They pursue understanding until Ranya's writes, "I had become aware that the more I learned about the common beliefs that link our three traditions, the more my belief in God was strengthened."(p. 85) Each of the women found this to be true. Rather than diluting their own religious beliefs, learning about another's religious convictions pushed them deeper into the bedrock of truth.

Suzanne summarizes the transformation the three experienced this way:

> It was through my own discussion with a Muslim and Jew that I was beginning to understand my Christian soul in a way I never had before. In talking with two people of other faiths, everything I believed had been called into question. Every assumption was up for

> examination and debate. I never would have plumbed my faith to the extent I had if I had not been in this conversation. In my attempt to understand Ranya's and Priscilla's faiths, I had begun to understand what was vital in my own. (p. 215)

Suzanne writes at the book's end, "One of the most important things I have learned from my Faith Club is not to judge anyone else's faith because everyone...is on a journey toward God and every dot on that journey is sacred." (p. 292)

For readers of *Sacred Journey*, Suzanne's words could be a summary of this journal's purpose. *The Faith Club* is an unexpected primer on interfaith dialogue for anyone who seeks a deeper personal faith and true friendships that cross religious rifts. Rather than outlining a theory or topics to affirm or avoid, this book tells the story of a friendship that shouldn't have flourished and almost didn't for many reasons. Ultimately it prevailed because three women committed themselves to listening to each other and finding the common humanity and spark of truth in each other. The book ends with instructions on how to start a faith club of your own. Readers of *Sacred Journey* are encouraged to do just that. For more information, buy the book and visit the authors' website: www.thefaithclub.com

ENDPIECE

Air Prayer

Lisa Barstow

A few years ago I discovered the power of prayer. My earlier idea of how prayer worked was a *get down on my knees in church communication with God, the Father, who would or would not grant me my wish depending on the mood God was in* kind of exercise. I have since learned that prayer is not so limited.

Now I can send a prayer out to God, the Spirit, he/she/universal energy and I am heard with unconditional love without a special place or position. I may be driving, taking a walk, or washing the dishes. When I think of a family member or friend who is in need of support, the suffering of beings all around the planet, or the planet itself, I feel the ever present connection to the energetic waves sending my intention for healing and peace out into the air. Are they gathered up by angels and sent directly through a benevolent universe? Perhaps. I know it really doesn't matter how it works, just that it does.

I am convinced this new understanding comes from listening to the energy I call God. True prayer, for me, comes from the willingness to be still and to listen. This means I must be able to surrender the belief that I know what is best and stop telling God what that is. True prayer has an ebb and flow, like breathing, embracing and being embraced by air.

Lisa Barstow trained with Amherst Writers & Artists and holds a BA in Creative Writing from Vermont College. Lisa facilitates writer's workshops and is currently at work on a personal memoir. Lisa's work is featured in the anthology Mid-Life Clarity: Epiphanies from Grown-up Girls.

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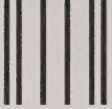

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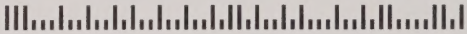

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